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ABSTRACT

The teaching of Standard English as a second dialect is discussed from the viewpoints of authors who oppose it as well as of authors who support it. (DB)

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BI-DIALECTALISM IS NOT THE LINGUISTICS OF WHITE SUPREMACY: SENSE VERSUS SENSIBILITIES

Melvin J. Hoffman

Accusations of covert racism have been leveled directly or by implication against linguists who support the teaching of Standard English as a second dialect. Two representative opponents of the teaching of a second dialect are Kochman (1969) and Sledd (1969). After a brief review of their position, I intend to oppose their arguments that the approval and encouragement of this concept, *Functional Bi-Dialectalism* is contradictory, mis-directed, discriminatory, and impractical.

The concept that they oppose has been defined by several authors who support bi-dialectalism:

Brooks (1964: 30) states:

> . . . should teachers not exploit the tremendous psychological uplift implicit in . . . saying . . . "I accept you and your language; use it when you need it for communication with your family and friends. But, if you really want to be a successful participant in other areas of American life, why not learn the kind of language accepted and used there.

Nonstandard Dialect (1968: 1) finds:

> Teachers should accept the pupils' nonstandard dialect in appropriate situations and build on the language patterns which pupils have been accustomed to using . . . Standard English thus becomes additive as another available language pattern while the original dialect may still be spoken in situations which the individual considers appropriate.

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Shuy (1969a: 89) gives the origin of the term:

> . . . The term *functional bi-dialectalism* was proposed at the Indiana University Conference on Social Dialects and Language Learning as a way of identifying a person's legitimate right to continue speaking a "home dialect" (one which might be called nonstandard) even after he has learned a "school dialect" (one which might be called standard).

Sledd and Kochman share a common conviction with many of the linguists who support bi-dialectalism: that no language or dialect is intrinsically inferior to any other.

Sledd (1308) after a discussion of the traditional stereotyped authoritarian English teacher, states that such a teacher:

> . . . is not popular any longer among educators. Though the world at large is still inclined to agree with her, the *vulgarizers* of linguistics drove her out of the academic fashion years ago when they replaced her misguided idealism with open-eyed *hypocrisy*.[1] To the *popular* linguists, one kind of linguistics is as good as another, and judgments to the contrary are only folklore; but since the object of life in the U.S.A. is for everybody to get ahead of everybody else, and since linguistic prejudice can keep a man from moving up to Schlitz, the linguists still teach that people who want to be decision makers had better talk and write like people who make decisions. [italics mine]

Kochman (87-8) points out that there is no easily identifiable standard dialect among the regional standards, that speaking a different regional standard may bring social handicaps, and that acceptability of speech, rather than being solely a matter of language mastery, depends on additional variables such as personality and the social and/or economic status of the speaker. Attempting to teach standard English in the face of these considerations is deemed a contradiction.

The main problem, these authors note, is prejudice, which will not end when a minority group member masters standard English. Kochman (88, and 157) argues very tellingly: a minority group member is well aware that he is suffering from social not linguistic discrimination; standard dialect mastery is not essential to many trades where discrimination exists; income disparity between minority and majority group members increases as educational levels rise. He concludes:

> The present efforts to teach a prestige form of speech to nonstandard speakers are educationally wasteful and the effective realization is socially improbable, unless the express desire and cooperation of those learning it are forthcoming.

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[1] Sledd, referring to bi-dialectalism as the "cloak of white supremacy" (1308), prefaces the word **bi-dialectalism** with the following modifiers: "compulsory" (1310), "mandatory" and "imposed" (1312), "coercive and "regimented" (1313), "enforced" and "obligatory" (1314). Further, Sledd (1308) seems neither hesitant nor unwilling to suggest selfish motives for any white linguist supporting bi-dialectalism:

> Black English provided the most lucrative new industry for white linguists, who found the mother lode when they discovered the interesting locutions which the less protected employ to the detriment of their chances for upward mobility. In the annals of free enterprise, the early sixties will be memorable for the invention of functional bi-dialectalism . . .

It would be interesting to find how Sledd would characterize the work of McDavid and McDavid (1951) and McQuown (1954) who, among others, had expressed these concerns for the language-learning problems of the disadvantaged before such concerns were either popular or profitable and who had anticipated many of the present problems and recommendations for solutions.

Sledd (1315) states this more strongly:

> . . . Nothing the schools can do about black English either will do much for racial peace and social justice as long as the black and white worlds are separate and hostile . . . regimented bi-dialectalism is no substitute for sweeping social change . . .

These arguments have been used to counter the contention of bi-dialectalists that standard language mastery eases the social and economic advances of minority group members. Both authors find this argument intolerable. Sledd (1309) claims:

> The basic assumption of bi-dialectalism is that the prejudices of middle-class whites cannot be changed but must be accepted and indeed enforced on lesser breeds.

More charitably, Kochman (88) remarks:

> It is to the credit of the linguistic approach that it has at least recognized that the speaker's native dialect has cultural values for him and is not to be tampered with . . . Unfortunately, the linguistic approach accepts as social determinant the same obnoxious and racist standards as the prescriptive-assimilationist approach . . .

Both authors contend that bi-dialectalism is impractical for two reasons: lack of cooperation from those being taught and lack of efficiency. Sledd (1314) and Kochman (88) feel that the bi-dialectal approach is doomed since minority group members will become less and less inclined toward the assimilationist approach and that emerging ethnic pride will increase resistance to second dialect learning. Sledd (1313) and Kochman (87) argue further that available materials are insufficient, that existing efforts have resulted in too little gain, and that not enough information is available about the structures of the dialects involved to permit the design of a feasible approach.

Both agree that advancement of social conditions should occupy the prior attention of people currently engaged in advancing the concept of bi-dialectalism.

Sledd (1315) minces no words:

> . . . They may purge themselves of inconsistency, and do what little good is possible for English teachers as political reformers, if instead of teaching standard English as a second dialect they teach getting out of Vietnam, getting out of the missile race, and stopping the deadly pollution of the one world we have, as horribly exemplified by the current vandalism in Alaska.

Kochman (157) suggests that racism may be crumpling and if social change occurs, the language problem will be solved as a by-product:

> . . . Does it really matter how people of status speak? You say, what if the social order is not changed? Then I ask you, what have you accomplished in your program: the ability to avoid some stigmatized forms which are so stigmatized because the people who speak them are?

A Refutation [2]

Certain considerations seem to be lost sight of all too easily: as mentioned earlier, linguists and those who have come into contact with lin-

[2] My thanks to Eloise Courter and Barbara Schnee for their helpful suggestions.

guists are well-aware of the relativity of standardness in language; American structuralists have sought continually to make this clear. Works, included in such collections as Allen (1964) and books such as Hall (1960) and others, are largely concerned with this and related matters of attitude toward language.

The lack of success that such efforts have had upon the profession of the teaching of English and the layman's nearly total unawareness of a non-prescriptive approach to language should indicate something about the attitude of most human beings toward correctness in language. Indeed, what little effect the introduction of linguistic sophistication had upon the *Websters Third International Dictionary* provoked vehement criticism from the linguistically naive but vocal and influential Eastern literati, which indicate the power that ignorance sanctified by tradition is still capable of exerting against a position supported by scientific evidence.

Judgments of the social acceptability of various forms of language are not solely judgments of the white middle-class. Both ethnic and social judgments are made by people of different ages, races, and status, often with a great deal of accuracy in identification. Findings of Shuy (1969b: 181-4), Labov (1964: 82-8), and Larson and Larson (1966) indicate that minority group members make the same judgments about language as majority group members although they may be more tolerant toward groups similar to themselves. What is more, minority group speakers tend to perceive themselves as employing the preferred of alternative forms even when this is not the actual case.

The features that are diagnostic racially or socially in any area may be few, arbitrarily selected, and narrowly regional in scope. Yet Labov (1969: 33-7) points out:

> . . . this overlap [either with Southern white speech or with the speech of recently immigrated white speakers who live in close proximity of black ghettos] does not prevent the features from being identified with Negro speech by most listeners: we are dealing with a stereotype which provides correct identification in the great majority of cases, and therefore with a firm basis in social reality. Such stereotypes are the social basis of language perceptions; this is merely one of many cases where listeners generalize from the variable data to categorical perception in absolute terms. Someone who uses a stigmatized form 20 to 30 percent of the time will be heard as using this form all of the time.

Existing bi-dialectal materials, dealing with such features, are indeed few as Sledd points out, and present results leave much to be desired. Yet, do such shortcomings argue that efforts should be abandoned to improve materials and to educate teachers to use them? Smith (1968: 119) writes:

> . . . language problems [of minority group members] must be seen through the eyes of sympathetic and linguistically sophisticated teachers, and they must be led to literacy by means of materials based on the most effective application of the findings of both modern linguistics and modern pedagogy. . . .

Maxwell (1970: 1159) answers Sledd:

> . . . The question of whether the school can or cannot teach a second dialect is a technical question, beyond his [Sledd's] competence, since he is not an authority on learning. While it may be that present methodologies cannot teach a second

> dalect [sic], it does not follow that methods cannot be developed.

I must concur with Sledd and Kochman in two criticisms however: more specific information about the effects of teacher attitude and linguistic interference should be available now as well as fully developed programs. It is time for linguists to progress beyond harangues and sample lessons. In Hoffman (1970) and in Davis et al. (1968), two examples of material addressed to these concerns can be found as well as in Feigenbaum (1970). In addition, three collections, edited by Aarons et al. (1969), Alatis (1969), and Baratz and Shuy (1969) include works, many of which address themselves to just such questions as design and implementation of concrete bi-dialectal programs. Hopefully, many more will be forthcoming.

The criticism of the desirability of bi-dialectalism requires further comment. Kochman (157) sees:

> . . . our society experiencing the throes of social reform this very minute. Our cherished prejudices and practices are being assaulted at every turn, besieged with long hair and "bad manners" on the one hand and Black Power and creative disorder on the other. . . .

Sledd (1315) finds:

> . . . the measure of our educational absurdity is the necessity of saying once again that regimented bi-dialectalism is no substitute for sweeping social change—necessity being defined by the alternative of dropping out and waiting quietly for destruction if the white businessman continues to have his way.

Somehow passed over is recognition that the learning of some kind of standard dialect or language is the normal situation for most speakers of any language in the world and that bi-dialectalism is normal and accepted in many countries. See Ferguson (1964: 114-5). The above quotations suggest social even military revolution. Forgotten by critics of bi-dialectalism is the matter of the standard language of China. Mandarin, the national standard of feudal China, now known as *Kuv Yu* or national dialect, has remained the standard speech both of republican Taiwan and the communist mainland; the concept of standardness in language for the Chinese survived two political revolutions of the world's most populous country. The Chinese experience throws a slightly different light on the effects of the changes that Kochman and Sledd suggest.

Those who ignore the considerations that second dialect and/or second language learning is the normal rather than the exceptional situation for many people in this world imply, however unintentionally, that minority group members in the United States are less able to fulfill such an expectation. The position opposing bi-dialectalism is, in this sense, more subtly paternalistic than the bi-dialectalism which is being attacked.

While the society moves toward mutual tolerance for culutral pluralism, what is going to happen to the thousands of students who must face the harsh realities of the here and now? Must we abandon *their* interests until the millenium? I raise the critics' own question: whose interests or sensibilities are to be taken into account? What does the student of the language-permissive teacher have to look forward to while discrimination continues? Speech differences may only be an excuse to justify a rejection already made on a prejudiced basis, but should we deny those who choose to remove this obstacle for themselves the opportunity to do so because such a choice may be offensive to *our* sensibilities?

Maxwell (1159) puts it in these words:

> There seems to be no reason in the world why the teacher of English cannot . . . educate people out of their prejudices and at the same time give them some skills which they can use to advance whatever cause they set for themselves. That is why we teach children the skill of reading and writing, so they can get ahead. If teaching them standard dialect to use at their discretion can get them ahead, why not help?

What about the student who wishes to conform or assimilate? Shouldn't everyone in a free society have the choice to conform as well as not to conform? Should we limit the implementation of educational policy to those advanced by self-styled militants and liberals whose actual constituency in both the majority and minority community may be far more limited than their rhetoric would suggest?

Maxwell (1159) writes:

> Sledd argues from evidence available to him that the black youngster may not *want* to speak the standard dialect. That's fine; and it should be his privilege not to do so. On the other hand, it should also be his privilege to put on the "man's" language whenever it suits his purpose. He should be allowed to make that decision as he shapes his decisions in life. But if he has not learned a second dialect, he is without the means to make that decision. Unfortunately, decisions on many educational decisions must be made by parents for their children. Sledd has listened to militants, but he gives no evidence (or ignores the evidence) that parents of black children consistently want control of standard English as one of their children's resources. And woe be to the school that tries for less.

Similarly in Hoffman (forthcoming), I submit:

> Only a person who *is* functionally bi-dialectal enjoys the *freedom* to choose to reject or accept either dialect, or to use both as the occasion demands. Proponents of . . . [arguments against bi-dialectalism] . . . seem no more willing to provide the learner with the capability to make his own choices than the prescriptive schoolteacher about whom all complain. . . .

Both Labov and Stewart in an unexpectedly heated discussion following a paper by Allen (1969: 198 and 201-2) partially support an observation which I invite the reader to consider and to be on the alert for: most opponents of bi-dialectalism have not only a passable but often excellent command of some regional standard as well as control of standard written English. I wonder whether the opponents of bi-dialectalism permit their own children to attend schools taught by teachers who do not believe in teaching standard English. Further, why don't the opponents of bi-dialectalism permit their own children to attend schools taught by teachers who do not believe in teaching standard English. Further, why don't the opponents of bi-dialectalism write their articles in the colloquial language of their dialect area if personality and content—not form—are to be the important considerations of the future?

Occasionally in conversations and in articles, the suggestion is made that bi-dialectal teaching should be avoided, because it may harm the learner. Maxwell (1159) replies to Sledd on this point:

Sledd claims psychological damage to students who would be taught a second dialect. He does not offer proof of psychological damage, and if he had some he would be hard put to demonstrate that such damage would have arisen exclusively from the fact of learning a second dialect. The many people of apparently sound mind who can switch dialects cast doubt on his assertions.

Linguists who support the bi-dialectal approach are called arrogant in prescribing what *others* should do. Because of circumstances of origin, education, travel, etc., many of us who support bi-dialectalism *now* are regional and/or social bi- and even poly-dialectals. Regarding arrogance and credibility, the reader is left to draw his own conclusions.

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